

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A UNIVERSAL TRUTH

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ABSTRACT

“ We cannot all succeed if, half of this is held back”

- Malala Yousafzai

Defining women is a hard nut to crack, as its definition of Vedic period is in contrast with the present modern-day world. Nearly half of the total world population is composed of women and children. Though their ratio is quite significant in comparison to men, yet they belong to one of the most vulnerable group in our society in the present scenario. Therefore, it is our responsibility to enact in an appropriate manner which will help this group of human beings to elaborate and enhance themselves socially, politically, economically and judicially, other issues and rights related to them. This is possible only, if we join our hands in efforts for their holistic growth and development - upliftment, upgradation and empowerment, by creating an environment for women where they can make decisions for themselves for personal benefits as well as for the sustainable development of the society, community and nation as a whole.

Keywords: *Women, vulnerability, upliftment, empowerment, sustainable development*

INTRODUCTION

The status of any country is judged by the status of its female gender, as it represents the social spirit and the standard of its cultures. India has been a country of diverse Diasporas, be it ethnicity, cultural, religious etc., since the time immortal, and has always witnessed the dominance of male chauvinism in the society and community. Historically, speaking almost all scriptural evidences indicate that Indian woman enjoyed a much higher status during the Rig Veda and early Vedic periods (2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.), which was better than the contemporary

civilizations in ancient Greece and Rome. The concept of gender equality of woman with man prevailed in India regarding acquiring and accessing of the highest knowledge, even the absolute ones, as a result they even held the highest social statuses during Rig Veda period.

But suddenly their status began ruining and showed a downward slant during the later Vedic and early Epic period. It was a period when their rights, responsibilities and privileges dramatically changed and as such women became non active participants and a silent observer in the functioning of the society. In Kautilya's Arthashastra one gets glimpses

that men became polygamous, child marriages, sati partha , abolition of woman liberations came into existence etc.

Although woman's statuses and roles were being transformed, still their situations were not downtrodden as of now a day. Drastic changes can be encountered in women status with female feticides and female infanticide, further enhancing their deterioration. The situations still loom at large, even though we have paved our way into the 21st century, with higher scientific knowledge and technological advancements, yet they are mostly unaware of their rights. The main causes behind this can be attributed to the patriarchal societies as one of the reasons, where most of the fundamental rights of the fairer gender are abandoned, due to the deep-rooted socio-cultural ideologies, norms and values.

These acts as a hurdle and hampers the overall progress of women of any country. Therefore it has now become the need of hour that this fairer sex should get their long awaited dues, where gender superiority of men does not have any place. This can be achieved with the help of a tool –Women empowerment.

यत्र नार्यस्त पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः ।
यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः ॥

(The divine is extremely happy where women are respected; where they are not, all actions (projects) are fruitless)

What the term "woman" signifies? It is gigantic. In deeper sense a woman is the glory of creation.

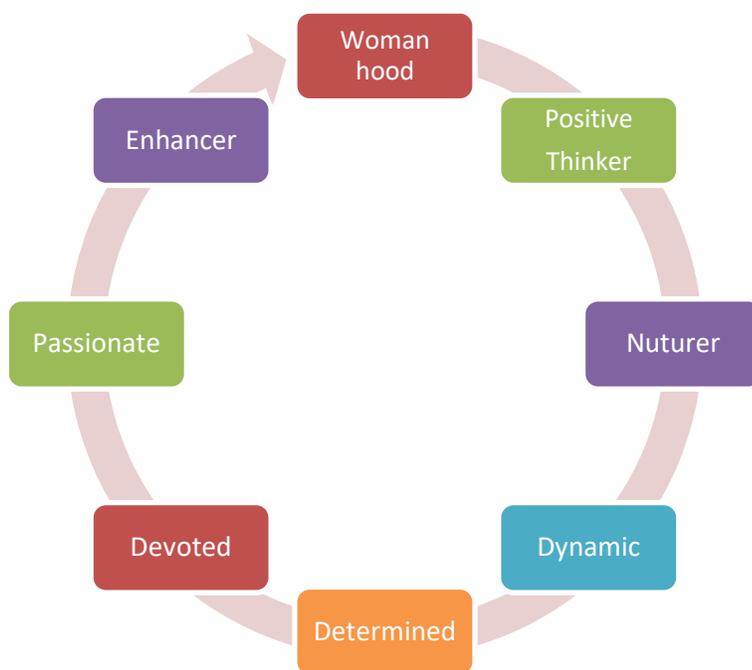


Figure 1: Attributes of Woman

Women and Empowerment are two self-explanatory words, which have very vast inferences. The term refers to the holistic enfranchisement and complete liberation of women from socio-economic

shackles of dependency and deprivations. It is a long-term struggle which needs to be ended now. The most famous saying of **Pandit Nehru** is apt in this context

“To awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves”.

Women Empowerment has the power to change the face of any nation in a vibrant perspective, leading to the sustainable development of community, society, economy of a nation. It is so because women in general are far calmer, wiser, and versatile and have immense patience in comparison to men. They can cope up and handle adverse circumstances within their family, community and society, in a much better man.

Women empowerment means really making women stronger. It is already written in our own Constitution, that women hold equality in all spheres of her life like their counterparts. India is doing its every bit to rise this deprived section of our society. To safeguard their rights, certain Acts and Articles and departments have been formed. Articles includes **Article 14, 16(2), 23, 39(a), 40(after 73rd Amendment), 42, 51A(e)** etc. Further-more **Hindu Succession Act 2005 (Amendment), Equal remuneration act 1976, Dowry prohibition act 1961, Hindu marriage Act 1955(preventing polygamy and bigamy), Child marriage (prohibition) Act 1929** and many more. Apart from these, the government is also running various schemes like **Rastriya Mahilla Kosh, STEP (Support to training cum Employment for women. This has been done for the financial development of rural women through self-sustainable employment)**. Enhancing their efforts the government is further stepping forward in this direction by promoting **Beti Bachao and Beti Padhao Abhiyaan and SABLA scheme**, which aim at reducing female infanticide and promoting the importance of educating a girl child.

India has leveled the gender equality in primary education sector, and is moving ahead with determination to level it, at all stages of education. But still the gap is a big one. In 2015 the ratio of women representatives in parliament was 12%, against the desired 50%. India today is also braving challenges toward violence against women in every sphere of their life, whether domestic, professional, sexual abuse and what not. For instance, surveys

have revealed that in New Delhi itself 92% of women have either faced sexual harassment or abuse in their lifetime at some point or the other. It is because of this, the government of India has made this aspect, an agenda on primary basis, which coincides with as one of the main aims of sustainable development by UN.

The economic survey of India 2017-18 has a complete chapter in it on women empowerment and gender equality. It also lays emphasis on **self-reflection by Indian society** on its preference for male children. The Survey talks about a phenomenon known as "meta preference" for sons, wherein parents continue to have children until they have had the desired number of sons – this has resulted in an immense number of "unwanted" girls – about 2.1 crore. The chapter also reminds us that despite an "improvement" in various parameters related to the empowerment of women, the preference for male children has not reduced: *"In some sense, once born, the lives of women are improving, but society still appears to want fewer of them to be born"*.

The chapter highlights that the biologically determined natural sex ratio at birth is 1050 males per 1000 females. Sex selection was declared illegal in India in 1994, and the sex ratio at birth during that time started to steady. In 1970, the sex ratio at birth was 1060 males per 1000 females, and in 2014, this number rose to 1108, much at odds with the notion that development would fix the skewed sex ratio. The Survey pointed that "son meta preference" does not only occur in impoverished rural families but also in middle and upper-middle class families, where according to tradition, a son is thought to carry on the family business or inherit ancestral property, even though a daughter is equipped to do as well, legally. The number of women not facing physical and sexual violence has gone up from 62.6 percent to 70.5 percent between 2005-06 to 2015-16.

The Survey also points out that only nine percent women are members of legislative assemblies (MLAs) amongst 4,118 members across the country. The highest percentage of women legislators are from Haryana, Bihar and Rajasthan

(14 percent), followed by Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal (13 percent) and Punjab (12 percent). (Source: -Economic Survey of India 2017-18). The government of India is doing every bit to transform the scenario, to curb the gender inequality, have made resolutions for upliftment of women and empower them, because it is a **moral imperative**.

In South Asian countries till 1990 the ratio of boys: girls in primary schools was 100 out of 74, this continued till 2012. To add to this the Parliament of all countries have only 22.8 percent women members at present. Gender equality is not only a basic human right, but also a fundamental basis of a peaceful and stable world. Keeping the woman out of mainstream, means that half of the population is far away from an accomplished society and participation in the formation of country's economy. But in today's world women are shouldering works along with men and issues related to women empowerment has become famous agenda. They are keeping their open perspective

w.r.t. education, business, home and many more. They are making their presence felt in every sphere of life. Times are changing and so is the fate of women. Women empowerment is not limited to urban working women but has spread its wings to the farthest towns and villages as well. Whether they are educated or not, but they don't want to lag behind, in achieving their social and political rights without considering their social and economic backgrounds. Although it is a fact that most women now a days do not face discrimination, yet some still are going through physical and sexual abuse, mental and emotional turmoil.

Sustainable development on the other hand is-

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

-Brundtland Commission (1987)



Figure 2:-Relationships in sustainable development- environmental, social and economic concerns.

(Source: <http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/akurry/files/2011/12/SDspheres.jpg>)

Based on the pillars- economic, environment, cultural, political and social sustainability. It can be acquired by striking a balance between these

integrated core aspects, envisaging in different spheres of life. Sustainable development requires an effort from all sectors. The 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development adopted by United Nations (2015, Goal -5.) is an ambitious, universal and holistic agenda. UNDP promotes an integrated approach that tackles the connected issues of multidimensional poverty, inequality and exclusion, and sustainability, while enhancing knowledge, skills and production technologies to enlarge peoples' choices, reduce risks and sustain development gains. Goal is to strengthen capacities and provide an enabling environment for access to opportunities, focusing on the most vulnerable and excluded population groups – in ways that are sustainable from economic, social and environmental standpoints.

Women empowerment is one of the major factors in economic and social development, and should not mean simply adding to their burdens of responsibilities or building expectations of women as “sustainability savior”. Firstly we must even integrate women empowerment into sustainable development, at the root level where, it reaches deeper down to the underlying causes of both issues: in most societies and economies, women's unpaid work and nature's services are not accounted for and therefore not valued properly in our economic, political or social systems. Secondly as women and nature are hardly visible or missing from mainstream development of economy. And last but not the least, women are considered divine creation of Gods, where it is assumed that they have all the power or say infinite ability for self-regeneration and self-maintenance. As a result, their contribution remains unnoticed, because in today's world development and wellness of any country is measured in terms of GDP & economic growth. **Thus, only communicating about women empowerment and sustainable development will not yield fruits.** But in order to achieve this goal, we **must** work with countries to build their capacity to integrate environmental considerations into development plans and strategies, to manage and sustainably use natural resources; ensure that natural wealth is used to promote economic recovery and livelihoods, and effectively target policies to reduce poverty and provide social

protection for those in need .And above all , it has been aptly mentioned in our Upanishads that

नारीशक्ति शक्तिशाली समाजस्य निर्माणं करोति .

(Woman empowerment can make the society powerful)

CONCLUSION

“Feminism isn't about, making woman strong. They are already strong. It's about changing the way; the world perceives that strength.”

G.D. Anderson

In true sense women empowerment is only possible when world's perspective will change towards them. It is only when women have confidence to lead a sarthak and purposeful life then only real women empowerment will take pace. Gender equality is not only the basic for human right, but also a peaceful and durable source, for the whole world. Keeping women out of mainstream, keeping nearly half of world population away from building of a prosperous society, sustainable and economic development. Equality in education, accessibility, beneficial work, making political and economic based decisions, are not only essential rights but it certainly leads benefiting humanity. Investing in empowering women will definitely leads to sustainable development, lessening of poverty and long-term durable growth in economy. Therefore, it is truly true that

नारी अस्य समाजस्य कुशलवास्तुकारा अस्ति

(woman is the perfect architect of the society) & as such

नारी राष्ट्रस्य अक्षि अस्ति

(woman is the eye of the nation).

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